

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claim 1 (currently amended): A process for the diesterification of C₄ dicarboxylic acids ~~production of carboxylic acid esters~~ by reaction of the dicarboxylic acid, ~~a carboxylic acid selected from mono-, di- and polycarboxylic acids,~~ with methanol ~~an alcohol~~ in the presence of water of solution comprising the steps of:

- (a) providing a solution comprising the dicarboxylic ~~carboxylic~~ acid and the water of solution;
- (b) reacting the solution of the dicarboxylic ~~carboxylic~~ acid in an esterification zone with methanol ~~an alcohol~~ to form an ester and water of esterification; said esterification being conducted at temperatures of from 65 to 150°C and pressures from 1 to 5 bar in a two-stage process;
- (c) removing the water of solution and the water of esterification; and
- (d) recovering the ester.

Claim 2 (original): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the process of the present invention is a continuous process.

Claim 3 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the water removed in step (c) is recycled to step (a).

Claim 4 (cancelled)

Claim 5 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the feed in step (a) comprises from about 50 to about 70 wt% water.

Claim 6 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the acid feed is processed prior to its supply to step (a) to reduce the water content.

Claim 7 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 in which the solution of acid is may-be subjected in the first stage to mono-esterification in parallel with a mono-esterification of a feed of anhydride.

Claim 8 (cancelled)

Claim 9 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 [[8]] in which the reaction of step (b) is carried out in an esterification zone comprising a first reactor in which the acid is converted to the mono ester and a second reactor in which the mono ester is converted to the diester.

Claim 10 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 in which one or more heaters is provided in the esterification zone, wherein the esterification zone comprises one or more reactors.

Claim 11 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 10 in which the one or more heaters is are located in the or each reactor close to the feed point.

Claim 12 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 in which water of solution and the water of esterification are substantially stripped out.

Claim 13 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 in which the esterification is carried out in the presence of a catalyst.

Claim 14 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 in which the ~~esterification is a two step process and the~~ second step of the esterification reaction is carried out in the presence of a catalyst.

Claim 15 (original): A process according to Claim 13 or 14 in which the catalyst is a liquid catalyst.

Claim 16 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the ester recovered in step (d) is contacted with a hydrogen containing stream in a hydrogenation zone containing a charge of a hydrogenation catalyst effective for catalytic hydrogenation to convert at least some of the ester to a desired product.

Claim 17 (original): A process according to Claim 16 wherein the water of solution and water of esterification is removed prior to the ester being passed to the hydrogenation zone.

Claim 18 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 16 wherein hydrogenation is carried out in the vapour

phase in the presence of a heterogeneous ester hydrogenation catalyst.

Claim 19 (previously presented): A process according to Claim 16 wherein the alcohol is recovered from the hydrogenation zone and recycled to the esterification zone of step (a).

Claim 20 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the process is for the production of dimethyl maleate, or dimethyl succinate. di-(C1 to C4 alkyl) maleate, di-(C1 to C4 alkyl) succinate or a C1 to C4 alkyl ester of 3-hydroxypropionic acid.

Claim 21 (currently amended): A process according to Claim 1 wherein the dicarboxylic ~~carboxylic~~ acid provided in step (a) is maleic acid.

Claim 22 (original): A process according to Claim 21 in which the maleic acid feed to be formed by hydrolysis of the product from a maleic anhydride reactor and the water rich stream recovered from the esterification zone is recycled to the absorber in which hydrolysis of the product from the maleic anhydride reactor is carried out.